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“C H A R I T Y :”

TWO SERMONS

PREACHED IN

HARLESTON PARISH CHURCH,

ON

Quinquagesima Sunday, 1882,

BY THE

REV. W. BURY, R.D.,

RECTOR.

and late Rector of Hazelbeach

PRINTED BY REQUEST OF SOME OF THE PARISHIONERS.

NORTHAMPTON:

PRINTED BY STANTON AND SON, ABINGTON STREET.

—
1882.

"Blessed is he that considereth the poor, the Lord will deliver him in the time of trouble."

PSALM XLI., 1.

ONCE more in every church in the land will be read, as the Epistle for to-day, that wonderful description of charity which an Apostle gave us some 1800 years ago, and which will live to the end of time as one of the most beautiful, and, I had almost said, one of the most misunderstood of all inspired utterances.

When we examine the passage carefully, we cannot help wondering how the virtue therein described could have ever acquired the meaning so commonly given to it.

Perhaps the fact is, that as men's practice gradually fell away from St. Paul's lofty ideal, they found it necessary to give their own interpretation to the words, and to find an easier and simpler way of exercising the virtue he enjoins.

But whatever be the cause, certain it is that very soon Christian men and women began to abstract from "charity," one by one, the many gifts and graces which clustered round it, till at length it was left bare of all but one, and came to be regarded as only another name for almsgiving. Henceforward it sunk lower and lower till it was little better than a mere selfish virtue. A name rather than a living principle. A cold and lifeless form from which the spirit had departed.

And among other disastrous consequences which arose from "charity" being thus degraded, was this—that what was once a living principle, to be possessed and practised by all, became the exclusive property of one particular class. The duty charged upon all, was supposed ere long to be confined to a privileged few. The rich only could be charitable! The poor must be content to remain destitute of such a virtue, and of the great reward belonging to it!

And worse than this—the rich began to look upon the poor, not so much as their fellow men, but as a distinct race or class, which God had created for their especial benefit, upon whom they were to practice their virtues and parade their condescension.

And with all our advances in knowledge and civilisation, we have failed very much to establish less false and mischievous views on the subject. The rich still very commonly imagine that the word charity expresses their money obligations to the poor—the poor still regard it as expressing their claims upon the purses of the rich.

But, as I said, when we look carefully at the passage, how impossible it seems to derive any such idea from it—Nay how careful the Apostle is to exclude the idea. Riches are mentioned only to show that they have neither part nor lot in the matter; and poverty is suggested to show that it is not necessarily the sphere in which charity may be exhibited. “Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, I have *not* charity.” Riches lavished on the poor, you observe, and yet no charity.

And yet without doubt, a very material part of true charity, has reference to our dealings towards those who are called the poor. I say *our* dealings, the dealings not merely of one particular class, or of one person here or there who may be possessed of wealth, but the dealings of us *all*, whatever may be our position, and whatever our means, towards those who are in need of that which we can give; whether sympathy, or advice, or influence, or even money.

And the words of my text seem to me exactly to describe what the nature of this kind of charity should be—“Blessed is he that considereth the poor”—“That *considereth* the poor,” you observe. Not “blessed is the man that yields at once to importunity.” Not “blessed is the man that indulges

his own kind heart." Not "blessed is the man that goes about the world scattering his money here, there, and everywhere, on the impulse of the moment. But "blessed is the man that *considereth* the poor"; that is, takes time, and thought, and trouble, and pains in dealing with their wants, giving or withholding, as the case may be, but neither giving or withholding without care or thought.

Now, my friends, tested by the words of the text how few there are of us who could lay claim to the blessing which it promises.

There are plenty of people, as we all know, who, sitting comfortably at home, and enjoying all the blessings which God has given them, can talk fluently and feelingly about miseries which they have never seen, and about wants and necessities of which they have only heard. And they give of their abundance—they subscribe very handsomely to every good work!

On the other hand, there are plenty of people who shut their ears to every tale of distress, and every call for help, telling you that charities are all mischievous, and poverty only another name for improvidence. They make a virtue of never giving at all.

But neither the one nor the other has perhaps, ever given a serious thought to the subject, nor sacrificed a moments pleasure to find out the truth; the one gives, the other withholds, but neither has "considered."

Depend upon it, the blessing of my text is not thus easily won; as with the greatest blessing of all so with this we may say "few there be that find it."

There is a heavy cost always about doing good, and there are few things so difficult, few things which need so great self-sacrifice as doing good to the poor.

It is probable indeed that many of us here have begun to see through the selfishness which is so often disguised under the name of charity, and are beginning to learn how much of that which has been done for the benefit of the poor, and done sometimes with the best intentions, has been productive of more harm than good, and has increased the very evil it was designed to cure.

For while no one can deny that there is much real and unfeigned distress in this world of ours, which calls for, and ought to call forth, our sympathies and our substantial help ; at the same time, no one can deny that there is much more distress that is pretended, and much more also that arises from vice and folly. And to distinguish one from the other, to know how to help one without encouraging the other, to know indeed how to help at all without weakening self-respect and independence and all the best qualities of a man's nature, this, as we all know, is the real difficulty, and in this is found the reason for what my text says, "Blessed is the man that considereth the poor."

But we are not, therefore, to give up the attempt because it is so difficult.

It is a duty which is laid upon us all. We may not shrink from it, we may not shirk it. Our best instincts, our fellow-feeling, our religion, our Master who was on earth and is in heaven will not suffer us to do so. We must exercise the gift of charity in some outward effort at doing good, or cease to be the children of our Father which is in heaven.

What then is to help us in fulfilling this difficult duty ?

First, it is something to have recognised that it *is* difficult, that there is need of thought, and care, and consideration—that we may not, and must not, gratify our feelings by giving on the impulse of the moment, but must learn the hard lesson of saying No !

Further, in this as in all difficult duties, we have much need of prayer. I am not afraid to say that every man, be his position what it may, who aims at doing good to a single individual, ought to begin, continue, and end, his efforts in prayer for the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Nor am I afraid to say that every man whose position in life gives him the power, or lays upon him the obligation of ministering to the wants of others—a rich man for instance, in a parish, or a clergyman, or a guardian of the poor, ought to make it a matter of constant and earnest prayer, that he may be filled with that wisdom which comes from above in order rightly to discharge the duties laid upon him.

And further still, while praying, as indeed he must, for wisdom ; he must use the reason which God has given him, he must profit by the experience of the past, and by the example and teaching of those who have been the true benefactors of their fellow-men.

For after all it is in and through our reason, and through the experience of the past, that God speaks to us every day. Through them he sends us answers to our prayers. Do not think because we call the Bible "the word of God" that God only speaks to us there. That is a very poor notion of God's dealings with us. Do not thus limit our Father's care and love. No ! He speaks to us in many ways—by the events of life, by the fresh discoveries of science, by the experience of the past, as well as by the voice of conscience. And to me it seems quite as wicked to neglect or to disregard these, as it is to neglect or disregard the plainest command laid down in the Bible.

And so if reason or experience has taught us unmistakeably that charity exercised in any particular way has proved mischievous in the long run, then, however hard it may appear, however unpopular it may make us, we are bound as Christians and honest men to set our faces against it.

And once more—Especially we ought to be guided by our Divine example. It is by looking at the principles on which our Father deals with His children, that we best learn the more excellent way of exercising our “charity.”

And the longer I live, and the more I think of this most difficult subject, and the more I try to learn God’s will about it, the more convinced do I become that, as a general rule, the proper sphere, perhaps the only safe sphere, of benevolence lies in providing opportunities. I mean, it lies in providing the means and opportunities whereby poverty and distress may be avoided, rather than in relieving the actual poverty and distress which too often have been caused by folly and improvidence.

For this, after all, hard as it may sound, is God’s plan. God gives opportunities to us all, but He does not interfere to save us from the consequences of misusing or abusing them.

“He is kind to the unthankful and to the evil.” “He makes the sun to shine upon the evil and the good, and sends rain upon the just, and the un-just.” All who will may profit by His kindness, and may prosper on the diligent use of the rain and sunshine which He has so freely provided. The means are there, use them, and God blesses them to your use, and you in the use of them. But neglect them, stand idle all the day long, and God’s great love bids you take the consequences and starve.

When shall we learn not to try to be wiser and more “charitable” than God? How is it that we can bring ourselves to adopt exactly an opposite course? That we can think it charitable or even wise to reverse God’s method. For this is practically what we do. We deny or fail to provide the opportunity, and then try to relieve the distress which our selfishness or our want of “consideration” has caused.

Too often it happens that the poor are denied a fair chance in youth and manhood. They must be content with wretched homes, low wages, few interests or opportunities for bettering themselves ; then when they are old and worn out, we think it charity to give them "parish relief," as it is called, a miserable pittance provided out of other people's pockets. When, I say, shall we learn the lesson which God teaches us, namely, to do all in our power to provide opportunities, to afford men fair chances in life—to remove hindrances—to make virtue easy and vice difficult—to put within their reach the means of obtaining light, and knowledge, and independence ; and then to say, as God says, "Use your opportunities, or take the consequences of your own folly?"

These are some of the thoughts which have occurred to me in thinking over the subject suggested by the epistle for to-day. I hope you will not think them out of place in a sermon, and I hope you will think them out for yourselves : for to my mind there are few subjects of more importance, both as regards this world and the next.

"Charity" there will always be while the world lasts—a true "Charity" and a false—the one blessing, the other cursing, both giver and receiver. The one making men honester, nobler, better—more fit for earth—more fit for heaven ; the other debasing men to the lowest level, and robbing them of everything which they ought to hold dear. What I say is, look beneath the surface, and learn to distinguish the false from the true ; the leaves may deceive you, but "ye shall know them by their fruits."

"Jesus of Nazareth . . . who went about doing good."

ACTS x., 38.

ON this particular Sunday in the year it is generally the custom for the preacher to select for his subject that of which the Collect and the Epistle for to-day so beautifully speak : I mean "Charity."

And indeed it is a very important subject, not merely because we are taught in that Collect and Epistle that without "Charity" a man is counted dead before God, but also because mistakes as to its nature and meaning have led to very disastrous consequences.

To-day I am following the usual custom, and I am going this afternoon to say a few more words on the subject of which I spoke this morning, namely, the teaching of Christ and the Gospel concerning "Charity."

Now, there are two aspects in which to regard it :

First. As a Christian sentiment, and secondly, as a Christian duty.

Regarded as a sentiment or feeling, it means love for our fellow men, and a desire to do them good.

Regarded as a duty, it is the carrying out of that love and desire.

The two are very different things.

To *feel* charitable is one thing, to *be* charitable is another. To *desire to* do good to others is easy enough, to *do* good is one of the hardest things I know.

Now it is on the second aspect of Charity, *i.e.*, Charity which consists in *doing* good, that I wish to say a few words this afternoon.

As I have said, the mistakes which have been made in this direction have led to some of the worst evils with which the world is now afflicted. And although Christians and enlightened people are beginning to learn by bitter experience, the lessons which God has been trying so long to teach, still the consequences of past errors are not to be easily wiped out. I honestly confess that for many of these mistakes, we clergymen, who have professed to be teachers of God's law, and preachers of the Gospel, are to a great degree responsible. Almost from the very first the clergy have sounded a false note, or at best have given a very uncertain sound. As a rule, the church and the clergy have led men to believe that charity was another name for almsgiving. And, as by degrees the mistaken ideas concerning charity were found to increase the wealth and power of the church, there was every inducement to go on as they had begun. On every hand, men were exhorted from the pulpit to almsgiving, as the true, if not only, form of charity, till almsgiving soon became the easy method or fulfilling the law of love, as well as of covering a multitude of sins.

And that this idea still prevails, I am afraid there can be no doubt. To this day a man is described as a very charitable person or the reverse, according to the amount of money he gives away, or is supposed to give away, among the poor.

Now, my friends, I am not going to say hard things about people who think or act in this way. It is not an unnatural way of thinking or acting ; and it has the sanction and approval of the world at large.

Nor am I going to speak against money-giving in itself. Indeed I, for one, think that men are never likely to be too ready to give. The danger is all the other way. It is not the amount that is given that does the mischief, but the manner in which it is given.

There are ample opportunities for this kind of benevolence. There is a need here, there, and everywhere, for a large-hearted liberality which does not stop to count the cost. Don't misunderstand me. Don't suppose for a moment that I wish to check people's liberality. Don't fancy that I want to close the rich man's purse. On the contrary, I think that it is not opened half wide enough. I say again, that it is not the amount given, but the way in which it is given that I deplore.

But what I want to point out more particularly is this. That it is altogether a mistake, and a very mischievous one too, to suppose that "charity" consists in, or has necessarily anything at all to do with giving money. What I want to condemn is the too prevalent notion that one man is necessarily to be called charitable when he gives his sovereigns or half-crowns, and another is necessarily uncharitable when he refuses to give.

You can't reduce charity to pounds, shillings, and pence. It lies altogether in a different sphere.

Let us think of this for a moment—what is it to be a really charitable person?

We shall agree that if we want an answer to this question, we can't do better than go to Him who in this, as in everything else, has left us an example that we should follow His steps. In the careful study of His life, in the intelligent reading of His precepts, we most assuredly shall find out what charity is.

He was surrounded, you remember, by poverty and distress. His *desire* to relieve must have been stronger by far than ours. His *power* to relieve was boundless.

His whole life was one act of charity : "He went about doing good."

How then did He do good ? How did He carry out the law of charity ?

Now we are struck at once by the fact that He never gave money. If charity consists in giving money, then neither He nor His disciples were charitable people. Observe, He does not forbid almsgiving—on the contrary, He lays it upon the rich as a duty to be very carefully discharged. Still here is a fact, He himself never bestowed an alms, and yet He went about doing good.

Then further we notice, that He never provided people with those necessities of life, which it is a man's own duty to provide for himself. It is man's duty to work, and it is God's law that if he does not work neither shall he eat. Christ Jesus never interfered with that law. He did not go about to provide the necessities of life for every idle person who chose to beg and refused to work for them. He had the power to feed every living man and woman every day. And yet only on two occasions did He exercise that power, and then He did it in such a way as to prevent idle people reckoning upon His compassion to relieve them.

Then further, He did not help or even heal people indiscriminately. Although He possessed the power to relieve every form of distress, or poverty, or sickness, or sorrow, and although it must have gone to His heart to see the misery all about Him, of which the world then, as now, was full,—nevertheless He put a constraint upon Himself, He checked His desire to help, and refused to exercise His power except in special cases.

There is, to my mind, nothing more remarkable in our Lord's way of doing good than this. Possessing the power to heal all, He only chose to heal a few. He could have supplied the wants of all by a word, and yet He spoke that word only now and again. Why was it ?

When He saw that crowd of impotent folk round the pool of Bethesda—why was it He only singled out one? Why did He not heal all? Was it not because His way of doing good, of being charitable, was no blind indiscriminate system of relief, but was exercised with due care, and thought, and consideration, because He knew the evils, and wished others to learn the evils of helping people who wouldn't try to help themselves, and because He recognised the wholesome lessons which suffering has to teach. So He put a restraint upon Himself, He refused to help everybody, He constrained Himself to say "no."

Further still—whenever our Lord relieved distress, it was with a view to moral and spiritual good.

His charity was of a kind which raised a man, and did him moral good, instead of degrading him. The bodily help was always used as a means to the spiritual welfare. It never left a man as it found him, but came ever with the charge, and with the strength to obey—"go and sin no more." Those whom He relieved, went home "clothed and in their right mind," to "show to others the great things done," to "glorify God," to "follow Him in His way"; or were changed from cringing beggars by the wayside, to honest out-spoken men.

And yet again—when Christ relieved it was not merely a temporary, but a permanent relief. His charity was not of that sort which is content to relieve the hunger of a moment, but cares nothing as to what becomes of the man afterwards. His help was *lasting* in its effects. He did not merely relieve the symptoms, He cured the disease. It was charity of that sort which sets a man on his feet again. Giving him self-respect, and sending him forward to a life of honest independence. He gave to the impotent fresh use of his limbs for work. He gave the blind sight that he might cease to be a beggar. He cleansed the leper that he might become a useful member of society.

And once more, and above all—Whether he relieved, or whether he refused to relieve : His “Charity,” His way of “doing good,” *cost Him dear*. His was not a comfortable way of “doing good.” His charity involved self-sacrifice. It was not of that kind which sits comfortably at home deploring the poverty and distress outside, and sends someone else to go and relieve it. Nor yet was it the charity of those who out of their abundance, give only what they can spare without feeling it. No ! His charity cost Him dear.

Think what it was for one so pure and holy, and sin-hating, to go up and down among those sin-degraded creatures in the towns and cities of Israel. Think how His tender heart must have suffered at the sight of woes and wants, so many of which He constrained Himself to leave unhelped. And then, the very effort to relieve—how He seemed to suffer with the suffering, how in all their affliction He was himself afflicted. Why those sighs which accompanied His healing miracles ? Why those tears ? Why that feeling of “virtue going out of Him” ? Was it not because He felt so deeply with those He relieved because it cost Him an effort, because in a word, “He, Himself,, took our infirmities, and carried our sorrows.”

Taking then Christ as our example, we see not only what a very beautiful thing charity is, but also how very difficult it is to be really charitable. To be charitable is to go about doing good. But in order to do good, what care, what self-denial, what Christ-like wisdom, are needed.

And thus, looking to Christ as our example, we may learn the principles which are to guide us in the matter.

We may sum it all up in a sentence. True charity is self-denial for the good of others.

Of course it is, you will say, nobody ever doubted it ; there is nothing new in saying that. My friends, I ask you to apply the principle faithfully, honestly, to your own charities, or to what commonly goes by that name. I wonder how much of it would stand the test.

Self-denial on the part of the giver, good real lasting good to the receiver.

As we think of it, one after another of our so-called charities fail and are condemned utterly by this simple test which Christ has given us, and has taught us how to apply.

The so-called state charity, for instance, which some people admire so much, poor law charity, parish relief as it is called: directly we apply the test, we see there is nothing whatever of charity about it.

Where is the self-denial of the giver? What self-denial is there in giving, however liberally, money that comes out of other peoples' pockets.

Where is the good to the receiver? Why, my friends, nothing is easier to prove, nothing is more certain, than the fact that harm instead of good has come of it. It has done more, perhaps, than anything else of the kind, to develop the worst side of men's character, to make the rich selfish, the poor improvident, to keep down wages, to destroy independence, and to increase the very evils which it sought to relieve.

Or apply the test to those so-called "charities," which have been left in years gone by to the poor of particular parishes, in order to provide small doles of money, or food, or clothing.

Where is the self-denial in the giver? The men who bequeathed the money for them, were, as a rule, actuated by the very poorest and most unworthy motives, as an examination of their bequests clearly shows; and at the best there could be no self-denial. They could not carry the money with them when they died. They must leave it behind to some one. They may have disappointed their relations, but certainly they could not have denied themselves.

Where is the good done to the receivers? Did you ever know any village really the better for such charities? Are the people in any village where they abound, really happier,

richer—better off in anyway than the people in the next village, where there are none? I could give you hundreds of instances where the contrary is the case, and where the existence of such charities has had a most mischievous effect, not only on the morality, but on the temporal well-being of the people; so much so, that it has become a very general saying, that “village charities are village curses.”

Or take one more instance—Apply the principles we have learnt from Christ, to that which is so commonly looked upon as a “charity,” the giving alms to a beggar.

Where is the self-denial in the giver? As a rule people give to a beggar to save themselves trouble—to get rid of him at the smallest possible cost to themselves. They do not even pretend to wish him well.

Where is the good to the receiver? Do we not all know that the country is at this moment pestered with a swarm of idle vagrants—a source of weakness, and a source of shame—of whom, not one in a hundred ever does, or ever intends to do, a day's work, simply because people think it “charity” to give a few pence or a handful of broken victuals, to the beggar at the door?

Now again, I ask you not to misunderstand me. Do not think that I am against all benevolence that takes the form of money-giving. Do not accuse me of wishing to stop the flow of liberality. On the contrary, I am all for increasing it. We can't have too much of it—but then it must be true and genuine, not false and mischievous. I want to see men and women awake to the truth in these matters, the truth as it is seen in Jesus Christ.

It is only by applying the principles taught by our Master, that we learn to distinguish the true from the false. All is not gold that glitters—all is not “charity” that goes by that name.

And I have brought the subject before you because I believe it to be most important that we should form a right judgement in such matters.

I am quite aware that these views of "charity" are not popular. I know that in trying to apply them one is not likely to get a good name. But the question is, are they true? Are they in accordance with God's will? Are they what our Lord and Master set us an example of? If they are, then it is our duty, yours and mine, to follow them out.

. In writing these sermons the very last idea which could have entered my head was that I should be requested to print them. As they were not written with a view to printing, I must ask that they may not be read too critically. They aim at being suggestive, not exhaustive. In pointing out as I have done, the defective nature of some existing forms of charity, I hope I shall not be accused of wishing "to deprive the poor of their rights." No one is more anxious than I to maintain them; all I ask is that it shall be made clear that they are *rights* and not *wrongs* in disguise. I am desirous of seeing in the place of dead, mechanical, and degrading forms of charity, something animated by a living principle of love which shall really bless both giver and receiver. This will require earnest work, and much personal sacrifice of time and money too—in other words, it will require

"CHARITY."

HARLESTON,

March, 1882.



